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Acts 15:1-21 – *Essentials of Renewal – Health*

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Continuing through the sermon series.

4 essentials of renewal: Abiding, Vision, Leadership, Health.

When we think about health we usually think about our bodies:

Are we free of illness and disease?

And are we able do those things we want to do?

But for the sake of this message I'm going to shift your thoughts on health in a specific direction...

Many of you here are musicians or music lovers...

So we're going to talk about health using the image of being in tune...

Asking the question, "What makes me healthy spiritually?"

I want to suggest that church health, and our spiritual health, is being in tune with God...

A church full of Christ's disciples is healthy when we are in tune with God.

Today we're going to look at the middle of Acts...

Acts 15:1-21

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question.⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the

Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’—
¹⁸ things known from long ago.

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

This is the Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

I played trumpet through middle school and three years of high school.

Before our concerts and performances, we would always make sure we were in tune...

That we all had the same pitch...not too high (sharp) and not too low (flat).

One of the wood winds, usually the oboe, would play the note and the rest of the band would tune to that note.

The hope was that every individual pitch would match the pitch of that one note.

If we were in tune, or healthy, then the song we were playing would sound right...

And we would accomplish our purpose of making beautiful music.

But if we were out of tune, or “unhealthy,” well then it didn’t sound so great.

I want you to listen to this familiar song and tell me if it sounds “healthy.”

(Play audio from Toto's Africa song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwNGR792lfk> 0:20-1:40)

Obviously this singer is out of tune...

And it hurts...it's not healthy.

Something similar is going on in our reading today...

Some of the believers (Jewish Christians) are out of tune...

God has a note of grace that he's playing, but his people are off pitch.

The note that God is singing is one of grace for the Gentiles...those who are not Jews.

Early on—back in the OT—God chose a certain group of people for himself...

These were the Israelites.

God revealed himself to the Israelites and blessed them...

He was *their* God, and *they* were his people.

To be a Jew—one of God's people—meant that you followed the law given through Moses:

You only ate certain things, if you were a male you were circumcised, and you celebrated certain festivals.

To be a Jew was to belong to this special group of people.

Jesus was born into this group.

But he was the Son of God sent into the world to forgive the sins of *all* who believed in him...

No matter what group you were in.

This Jew Jesus lived a perfect life...was crucified, died, and was buried...

And on the 3rd day he rose from the dead.

And now because of what he did, non-Jews were welcomed into God's family.

Those who at one time didn't belong—who were outsiders—

They are now insiders.

This is God's tune:

People are saved through the grace of Jesus Christ...

No matter who they are.

But some of God's people were out of tune...

They were putting up barriers for people turning to God.

They were saying that the Gentile believers had to be circumcised and keep the law...

“Sure you can be included in God’s people...you just have to be like us.” (PAUSE)

This is the same tune/pitch that God is playing today...

And if we’re looking to be a healthy church—

A church looking to play a beautiful piece of music—

We need to be in tune with God...

For ourselves and for others.

First, for ourselves.

I think it is common for Christians—even for people sitting here this morning—

To add to what God requires of us for salvation.

Some of us were born into families where our parents had high expectations...

Sure they loved us...as long as we _____.

And we transfer this to our relationship with the Lord.

We think that we have to do such and such in order to earn God’s love/favor...

So we exhaust ourselves trying to do and be good enough.

Instead we are people of grace.

It is by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we’re saved....

We don’t need to add anything on top of what he did.

Second, being in tune with God means grace for others.

The Lord has had much grace on us...

Now do we turn around and give that same grace back?

Let’s ask ourselves, “Are there any ways that we’re making it difficult for those wanting to turn to God?”

Are we putting up barriers for those whose hearts are being stirred by Christ?

Where are we telling people they need to conform before they’re accepted?

Most of the time we don’t do this intentionally...

We don’t purposefully make it hard for people to fit in...

But we have traditions, customs, and routines that we're comfortable with...

And over time this becomes the culture of a group of people.

The people that have been in the group for a long time know the traditions and routines...

They know what words are appropriate to use in conversation...

And what kind of conversation is acceptable;

They know what you're supposed to dress and look like;

They know *where* they're supposed to sit and *who* they can sit with;

They get the cultural jokes and idioms.

But when a new person comes into the group, everything is foreign to them.

They don't understand anything that's become tradition and routine to the existing members of the group.

So it's hard to break in...(PAUSE)

There are people wanting to turn to God...

But in some ways we make it difficult.

In some ways we ask them to conform before we'll accept them.

This happens in our work, at school, in our communities and in our church.

It's easy to do things the way we're used to doing them...

It makes us feel better when we're comfortable...

It feels good knowing that we're a part of the in-crowd...

But what happens to an instrument over time?

If I started strumming on Charlie's guitar eventually what would happen to it?

It would get out of tune...

I might not notice if I wasn't comparing it to another note...

But if Deborah played the tuning key on the piano again, and I tried to match it, I might be way off!

And it's the same for us.

There are ways in which we've gotten out of tune with the note of God's grace...

How he's welcoming people different from us...

He's calling people to himself and they're coming through those doors...

What would happen if he called an addict through those doors?

Someone who came to faith at an AA or NA meeting—

Someone who wants to worship God and see what the community of believers is all about?

Would we actively welcome them?

Would we be in tune with God's purpose to see them accepted here and see them grow as Christ's disciple?

What would happen if God called a questioning millennial through those doors?

God has been working in this woman's heart and turning it toward himself...

He brings this woman to our church to root her in a community with God's people.

What if she came with her doubts...

If she questioned God's goodness;

If she questioned the use of obeying God;

If she was open and honest about the doubts and pain that she's experienced.

Would we be in tune with God's purpose to the point that we first saw her...

Would we be so in tune with God's purpose that we excuse ourselves from our usual group to go up to her?

Would someone go up and welcome her?

Would we ask how she was doing?

And then care enough to stick around and listen...

And would we bother to walk alongside of her when she was honest about her skepticism toward the worship service?

What about that person you see every Sunday—

The one who faithfully shows up week after week—

But you've never once said a word to them.

You know they worship here but you wonder if they "belong..."

Are we so in tune with God's note of grace that we introduce our self this time?

Where we actually take the uncomfortable step of getting to know them.

This is the struggle that the first century church is going through:

“What do we do with the people who aren’t like us?”

“They can be one of us...one of God’s people...but they need to look and act like us.”

Thankfully God is in control of things...

And he’s getting his church in tune with his will...

Or we can say, *God* is making his church healthy.

And we see him do this through a couple different means.

First, he’s doing this in his Word.

When James stands up after Peter speaks he says,

“The words of the prophets are in agreement with this...”

The word he uses is symphonousin = symphony.

They share the same sound....

The sounds ‘match’ or ‘agree.’

James is saying, “If we look at God’s word it agrees with what Peter is saying...”

“That God is welcoming a different kind of people.”

“They don’t have to look like us...”

“They don’t have to follow the law...”

(we’re going to ask them to be sensitive to some of the ways our brothers and sisters celebrate...)

“But as long as they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are God’s people...”

“And we are not going to put up a barrier.”

This has been God’s plan from long ago...

That all of humanity would seek the Lord...

This is the note played all throughout Scripture...

This is our tuning note.

It was confirmed in God’s call of Abraham:

Where God says that he will bless Abraham so that he would be a blessing.

It’s carried through the prophets and fulfilled in the New Testament...

That one just has to believe in Jesus Christ to be welcomed into God's family.

God is also getting his church in tune with his will through leaders in the church...

Yes he does this through preaching and teaching from up front...

But I don't want to talk about the paid pastors here.

I recently learned that there are a few people in this congregation who challenged each other.

They've recognized that it's not always easy to feel a sense of belonging here.

It's not easy to overcome the traditions and routines.

They realize that some people come to worship here week in and week out...

And yet they still don't feel like they belong.

So, some of your brothers and sisters challenged each other to have dinner with a couple, a single person, or a family that they don't know.

And to show you how serious they are...they set the deadline for Christmas.

This is an excellent way break down barriers to belonging...

To allowing God to tune us to his will.

And finally, we see the Lord working through experiences in the NT church...

If you kept up with our congregational reading of Acts you read about these experiences:

Cornelius the Gentile and all who heard Peter's message received the Spirit of God;

The group of Gentiles who believed Paul's testimony from Pisidian Antioch;

The Philippian jailer who is saved...and his entire household;

Greek men and women from Berea and Athens join God's family...

These are people who at one time had no place in God's family.

But the Lord was opening up doors all around them.

He was opening up eyes and hearts and calling them into his fold.

He was expanding the meaning of "My people."

Where once it was only the Israelites...

Now it was all who called on Christ.

So keep your eyes open, church.

Keep your heart tuned to the note of God's grace.

Who is he bringing into our midst?

Who is he calling you to reach out to...

To break down barriers and welcome them into his family.

Because it may not be someone that we'd expect...

The Lord has opened the way of salvation for all people turning to him...

And now they're members of our family...

Or should we say, we're members of their family.

This is how God is tuning his church...

Opening us up to his work...so that his church might play a beautiful song all to his glory.

Amen.